

Comfort Ye My People

A sermon preached by Ted Atkinson, Minister, Oxford Presbyterian Church, Oxford, PA on the first Sunday in Advent, December 1, 1996. Scripture Lessons: Isaiah 40:1-11; Psalm 85:1-2, 8-13; 2 Peter 3:8-15a; Mark 1:1-8.

IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER AND OF THE SON AND OF THE HOLY SPIRIT. AMEN.

Fifteen years ago a man I loved as a father and brother was accidentally killed while working on his farm. Only 55 year old, Jim Haughwout was a man of God, a Presbyterian elder of the finest ilk, and deeply devout with a wonderful sense of humor. Before Kay and I married in 1976 I spent nearly every Sunday afternoon at the two hundred year old Haughwout dairy farm for dinner. Jim sits at the end of the long wooden-plank dinner table. His six children and I line up on both sides sitting on wooden benches, and his wife at the other end. The smell of roast beef, mashed potatoes and coffee fill the room. A roaring fire blazes in the kitchen fire place used a hundred years ago as a stove. Before we lift our forks to eat Jim opens his Bible, like the Scottish patriarch in Robert Burns immortal poem, "The Cotter's Saturday Night". He reads a chapter of God's Word with deep feeling. He closes the book and bows his head. He folds his huge rough hands, and with a smile on his face, talks to God as one who knows him as his friend.

God is with us in a wonderful way as we sit around the family table, talk and laugh. It's a joyous family gathering, and I feel honored to be included. When his wife, Patsy, called me a few hours after his death I was reduced to silence. I felt callous because of my lack of words. Above all, I felt so distant. So far away. I simply wanted to put my arms around

Patsy and her children and cry with them. I wanted to comfort them.

"Comfort, O comfort my people, says your God." God commands Isaiah to comfort his people as they languish in mournful exile. Instead of saying, "I'm going to comfort my people" he says, "You comfort my people." "You, Isaiah, and all who hear me, comfort my people." God also addresses us and calls us to comfort God's people.

When I read those words I think of Jim's widow, Patsy. What a happy, joyful couple they were. How much she needed, then, to be comforted. And then I thought of you, my congregation. I thought back over this past year. I saw the faces, I heard the voices of men and women and young people who have died and entered the church triumphant. I think also of their wives and husbands, mothers and fathers, sons and daughters. I think of you, troubled, as so many of us are, by various physical, emotional and spiritual crises in our families. There's hardly a family in this congregation not in need of comfort.

One of the most constant prayers in my life is, "Lord, how do I comfort." If only I had words to speak comfortably to people who feel despair, disappointment, loneliness, guilt, and grief. If only I had the vocabulary to select words that would make the pain go away and fix every problem.

But Isaiah goes on to say, "Behold, the Lord God comes.... He will feed his flock like a shepherd; he will gather the lambs in his arms, and carry them in his bosom, and gently lead the mother sheep." When I read those words I see a perfect picture

of comfort. I begin to realize that comfort is found not only in words but in embraces. To be comforted is not so much to be talked to, but to be touched, as hands touch, as bodies touch in a close embrace. To be comforted is to be gathered like a lamb in the arms of a shepherd. To be comforted is to be carried in the bosom of someone who loves us unconditionally.

When God comforts us he doesn't merely fill the air with words. Yes, God's word can be very comforting. But God doesn't merely speak to us through the words of prophets long dead, or through the words of preachers. He doesn't simply call to us across the infinite distances which separate heaven from earth. He comes to us. He touches us.

Christmas means that God - God's very self, in the person of ~~Jesus~~, has come to feed us, has come to gather us in his arms and carry us in his bosom and gently lead us. To be comforted is not simply to be talked to but to be touched gently and lovingly.

On that first Christmas think of where true comfort was found? Comfort was not found in the inn. Oh, I'm sure the inn was nice and warm, a cozy fire in the fire place, nice warm beds, a little room all to yourself. But comfort wasn't found in the inn that night. You'd think comfort would be found in King Herod's palace, with servants to wait upon us, luxurious meals, deep oriental carpets, but comfort wasn't found in Herod's palace that night. Comfort was found, not in power and might and abundant resources, but with a man and his young wife huddled together, holding fast to each other in the dark cold of a stable in their trouble and pain. In astonishment, they discover God -

born in their midst. Emmanuel. God with us. God closer to them than every before.

God still comforts us today and shows us how to comfort others. Jesus has given us the comforter, the Holy Spirit. But his comfort is mediated through brothers and sisters in Christ who love one another, care about one another, trust one another, not just because we're naturally friends and have grown up together, but in spite of the differences that separate us. The comfort God gives us today is always mediated through brothers and sisters in Christ.

What is your immediate need this morning? And what is the need of the person sitting next to you? I know some of you are living in secret heart-break and disappointment. Will you let Christ comfort you? Will you let Christ gather you in his arms and carry you in his bosom through a trusted brother or sister in Christ? And will you use the gifts God has given you to comfort someone else today - maybe the person next to you, maybe someone not even here today?

One of my greatest concerns is for Christ to baptize our congregation with his Holy Spirit in such a way that we might mediate more effectively and warmly the comfort of Christ to those around us. I long for our congregation to gather Christ's lambs with our arms and carry them in our bosom.

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and the God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our affliction, so that we may be able to comfort those who are in any affliction with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God. Amen.